

Woke: The Elite Protection Racket

by David Randall

We Have Never Been Woke: The Cultural Contradictions of a New Elite, Musa al-Gharbi, Princeton University Press, 2024. pp. viii + 421, \$28.67 hardcover.

Musa Al-Gharbi's *We Have Never Been Woke* is a delightfully and acidly feline portrait of our ruling class. The wokeness of our top quintile, especially pronounced among their white female “symbolic capitalist” cohort, coexists with securing their self-interest and persisting membership in America's elite. They do so particularly by blithe enjoyment of low-wage labor by minorities and immigrants—enjoyment which co-exists easily enough with loudly articulated “woke” sentiments. Al-Gharbi's jaundiced account of the Woke also is a measure of bland reassurance: our white elites, latter-day Vicars of Bray, will remain America's elites through any ideological revolution.

Al-Gharbi founds his work on artful definition. America's elite has become overwhelmingly one of “symbolic capitalists,” defined first and foremost by how they make a living: non-manual

work associated with the production and manipulation of data, rhetoric, social perceptions and relations, organizational structures and operations, art and entertainment, traditions and innovations, and so forth. Think academics, consultants, journalists, administrators, lawyers, people who work in finance and tech, and so on (8).

These symbolic capitalists have become an increasingly large proportion of America's elites, and an increasingly large proportion of America's population as a whole. Al-Gharbi roughly defines “elite” as the top quintile of America's income earner households (131-82).

Wokeness, as neurasthenia in days of yore, is an affliction of these elites. Al-Gharbi takes symbolic capitalists a century ago to have incorporated moral mission into the definition of various professions (law, social work), not least as a way of restricting membership in these professions to America's elites.

These moral missions also ensured ever-expanding employment for symbolic capitalists in the ranks of the charitable bureaucracies (broadly defined), for the function of redistribution was at least as much to employ redistributors as to help the nominal beneficiaries (60-65). The moral mission predisposed symbolic capitalists to the moral and intellectual commitments that have coalesced as woke ideology—an ideology that al-Gharbi refuses to define, but takes to be an intellectual “keyword” associated with other keywords. (27-31, 65-66) The keywords include: interconnected commitments to antiracism, feminism, LGBTQ rights, and environmentalism; aesthetic embrace of diversity, inclusion, trauma, and disability; identity, subjectivity, and lived experience; self-care and self-affirmation; acknowledgment of “privilege” and deference to “minoritized populations”; ineradicable “unconscious bias”; focus on disparities between groups, and a quasi-mystical approach to identity (31-32).

Al-Gharbi elaborates on this list by coining the phrase “totemic capital(ism)”—the social capital of a culture that marries identity politics and valorization of victimhood, “*the epistemic and moral authority afforded to an individual on the basis of one or more of these totems*—that is, on the basis of claimed or perceived membership in a historically marginalized or disadvantaged group.” The woke, ironically, have a tendency to acquire totemic capital by pretending, and/or convincing themselves, that they are minorities or cripples—the last,

expanded to the realms of mental suffering, renamed as *trauma* or *neurodivergent* (219-67, esp. 237-38).

Al-Gharbi examines and dismisses alternate theories for the cause of wokeness, including technological change, generational change, Trayvon Martin’s death, and Trump’s 2016 election. The current spike of wokeness, from about 2012 to 2023, repeats and intensifies similar spikes of liberal elite commitment in the 1930s, 1960s, and early 1990s. Al-Gharbi finds commitment to radicalism largely to derive from anxiety about elite employment—and wanting radicalism to correlate with greater employment for symbolic capitalists in government, nonprofits, and private enterprise. The greater intensity of the later Woke spikes is simply because we have more college students and graduates, more symbolic capitalists, more liberal elites competing for the same make-work jobs (67-130).

Wokeness serves “as the ruling ideology of this increasingly dominant elite formation”—the overlap of symbolic capitalists with “highly educated, relatively affluent white liberals” (8, 33). As with symbolic capitalists in general, it is highly political, more concerned with forging elite consensus than actually solving the societal problems it diagnoses, dogmatic, censorious, conformist, biased against the uneducated, incapable of empathy with dissenters, and astonishingly short of self-awareness about its own biases (191-201). As it has clustered within and captured the Democratic party, it has exported its charac-

ter and its weakness to the party as a whole (201-06). Indeed, the slackening pace of American scientific, technological, economic, and cultural innovation probably has something to do with the capture of American society by conformist, intolerant symbolic capitalists (206-13). It rhymes with earlier American religious commitments—hence the phrase “the Great Awakening”—although al-Gharbi intelligently cautions against emphasizing the religious parallels, since they sometimes rely on polemics against religion, Christianity, and Puritanism rather than on careful descriptions of their substance (43-48).

Al-Gharbi emphasizes how social justice ideology serves elite interests not least because the Woke know remarkably little of the basic texts of Woke ideology that they purportedly endorse and blithely ignore inconvenient writings (52-54). And then, the Woke are all for talking social justice, but are less good at following through with charitable deeds.

Studies consistently show that the Americans who are most likely to give, and who dedicate the largest share of their income to charity, are actually those from the lower socioeconomic quintiles and those who live in rural, suburban, or “red” districts—particularly those who identify as religious or conservative (185-86).

Symbolic capitalists, as they grew more numerous, also began to sort themselves in the last generation into one political party (Democrats) and one ideological tendency (wokeness).

Al-Gharbi takes the substantive ideology and its illiberal commitments to matter less than elite endurance and elite behavior. Symbolic capitalists are still largely white, although by now disproportionately female. Symbolic capitalists preserve a pleasant lifestyle, not least by deputing boutique services (yoga, “artisanal” goods), retail purchases (Amazon), cooking (restaurants, delivery), chauffeuring (Uber), and child care (nannies) to low-paid minorities and immigrants, and their employers (147-57). They cluster in cities such as Boston and New York, frequently in areas suffused with universities, which dedicate urban planning to support their lifestyle with amenities such as parks, bike paths, and just enough “diversity” for local color—but not to the extent that it might truly inconvenience (158-62).

Al-Gharbi spends some time repeating variations of, “There is no contradiction, then, in assuming that a belief or identity claim is sincere while also recognizing that material or ideal interests seem to inform the adoption of this identity or belief” (55). But the oft-repeated protest *of course they’re not hypocrites!* is a rhetorical device. The substance of *We Have Never Been Woke*, and the pleasure in reading it, is its devastating portrait of our thoroughly hypocritical, effectively self-interested woke ruling class.

Al-Gharbi has stylistic moxie; but is his account true? Or useful as a guide for action? I have some reservations.

Of course sociology, as Freudianism and Marxism, is one of those unpleasant systems where a new class of would-be priests affirms that it knows more about the wellsprings of your conduct than you do. Within sociology's swaggering realm, Al-Gharbi's lode-star is Pierre Bourdieu, who, especially by means of the concept of "symbolic capital," applies sociological analysis to ruling class culture (24-26). This is delightful as a way of turning sociological analysis on the would-be analyzers. But it also is a move to disable any competing intellectual theory. Both the woke and the anti-woke are symbolic capitalists whose culture-war arguments are merely a way of gaining status and earning a living; hence al-Gharbi prophylactically neutralizes any critique of his work (such as this review) by dismissing it as so much symbolic-capitalist grubbing for reputation and riches. (38-43, 119-23) *We Have Never Been Woke* is a nifty little exercise in the rhetoric of unfalsifiability.

But a great deal of *We Have Never Been Woke* is dubious. The term "symbolic capitalist" unifies a great many disparate lines of work. In similar fashion, "white" unifies a great many disparate groups—WASP, Catholic, and Jew, men and women, Southerner, Midwesterner, and Northerner. His definition of "elite" to include the entire upper income quintile likewise obscures differences between the executive and the functionary symbolic capitalists, and indeed between the fabled 1 percent and the rest of his capacious elite. Then

too, he takes *family* income as the definition of an elite: a lawyer in 1950 who earned enough by himself to take care of his family is as much an elite as two married wage-slave paralegals in 2025. Al-Gharbi's argument for elite continuity depends on choosing artfully capacious umbrella terms that support his thesis. His sociology requires myopia to convince.

Al-Gharbi does perform a valuable service by focusing on the interests of America's upper income quintile. America effectively has become a latter-day Edwardian England, with an upper class of 5 percent of the population, a middle class of 20-25 percent of the population, and everyone else distributed among the working class and the poor. We should not conflate the upper and middle classes, but we should formulate our policies with a sharp sense of how they will affect our elite upper quintile.

Some part of our policy explicitly must be to rebalance elite employment away from symbolic capitalist pursuits and toward productive ones. America has difficulty paying for the current sinecures for our elites, much less paying for an expanded supply. We wish our elites to preserve their status by guiding their children toward careers as manufacturing engineers, and any employment that is more than playing with symbols in a status game.

Some part of our policy must acknowledge the roots of woke attachments. The woke idolization of illegal aliens seems bizarre—until you realize

that our elites, and especially the women, perceive illegals as a way to maintain an elite lifestyle and afford a family. Any policy we propose should take care to address the elite belief that they need cheap labor to afford children.

Then we must acknowledge that some of our reform goals may be more difficult than we think. We should reform colleges so that they no longer impose an extortionate price tag for students—but al-Gharbi’s analysis suggests that the price of college is high precisely because it serves to strengthen intergenerational elite continuity. If we were to make college cheap, the elites would find another expensive qualifying mechanism for good jobs.

Nothing al-Gharbi writes should be taken to have the authoritative stamp of science, or even social science, but he is a good satirical journalist. He conveys truths attainable by a humane, if satiric, man of letters. These make his illuminating book very much worth reading.

David Randall is director of research at the National Association of Scholars, 420 Madison Ave., 7th Floor, New York, NY 10017; randall@nas.org. His most recent books are *The Concept of Conversation: From Cicero’s Sermo to the Grand Siècle’s Conversation* (2018) and *The Conversational Enlightenment: The Reconception of Rhetoric in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (2019). Randall last appeared in AQ in the winter of 2024 with “Is Western Civilization Real,” a review of Josephine Crawly Quinn’s *How the World Made the West: A 4,000 Year History*.
